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At one level of understanding, waiting is associated with passivity or feeling that one is unable to move or act. When we wait, we are caught in between one action and another, in between moving from one state of being to another. What is more, we are often not in control of our movements but are subject to another will. Waiting, in this sense, entails multiple suspensions—of our power to act, of action or movement itself, and of time. Recall the scene in *Waiting for Godot*—which one? Are they all the same because nothing happens? Nothing happens.\(^1\) Didi and Gogo have lost their power to act, they cannot remember why they are waiting, they cannot move away from the place, yet they cannot be sure that this is the right place, and they cannot recall the time—was it tomorrow or yesterday? Having lost their power to act and to locate their positions in time and place, the only thing they can do is wait.

Of course, Didi and Gogo portray an extreme form of existential waiting. Nonetheless, we have all experienced modulations of this
kind of waiting and felt the host of emotions that accompany such waiting—anger at the surrender to a power outside our own, boredom at the nothingness that happens while waiting, hope and the anticipation of the end of waiting, and relief when the waiting is over. In the popular example of the queue, Mann explores how long overnight queues function as a social system, in which one’s order in turn is linked to practices of ‘time out’ and ‘serving time’.2 Paying attention to social rules brings waiting into the realm of sociality and procedures. Such moderation and ordering reverberate through the waiting lines of our society. Yet why is it that the emotions accompanying the act of queuing range from polite deference to frustration when we wait for longer than we deem acceptable and sheer rage at queue-jumpers? How is it that waiting in this context, even with moments of playfulness and conversation, is generally experienced as ‘suffering’?

Sometimes, but not always, another sense of waiting weaves through these emotions, one that reminds us of the etymological root of ‘waiting’ in French. Attente, or ‘attending’ is to direct one’s energies or mind towards something, to pay attention to, to wait for. This reveals a sense of waiting that requires our five physical senses to be attentive and interactive, the way that hunters wait for prey or mountain climbers wait for belay. Waiting, in this sense, provides the framework within which I explore in my essay how the people who are waiting employ their physical senses to know the passing seasons and the changing pastures that underlie their movements. On the Tibetan plateau, nomads move from place to place according to natural rhythms and cycles of time. Hence, waiting marks the necessary pauses and breaks in the general movement of life; it is part of a symphonic whole and, because of the nomads’ constant interaction with their time and place, waiting does not engender the feeling of being ‘stuck’, even when one has stopped. This occurs even though Tibetan nomads submit to the authority of those monastic leaders and community elders who interpret the stars.

Waiting encompasses a range of senses. Its complexity can be understood in relation to the contexts in which we wait. And who we are regulates how we wait.
Waiting to Move

Dora Karmo is the name of a place where a community of Tibetan nomads lives. It is located in the Minyag area of the eastern Tibetan region of Kham, and is approximately 2000 kilometres from Lhasa. The name rdo ra dkar mo literally means the circle of white rocks. The nomads of Dora Karmo are a community of around 300 people. As nomadic pastoralists, they rely on the production of their animals, mainly yak, for subsistence either through direct consumption of milk, butter, yogurt and meat or through exchange with farmers for other dietary staples, such as barley, wheat and potatoes. Because yak constantly graze, the search for fresh pastures regulates the movements of these nomads from one regular place to another regular place with their yak and other animals. This attachment to place exists simultaneously with a continual leave-taking from place, illustrating Ingold’s point that even though nomadism is symbolised in the pastoral animal, it is equally located in the pastures, and nomadism entails a sense of changing places in a routine pattern of movements.

In 2006, I conducted fieldwork in Dora Karmo for my doctoral research. At the end of winter, allowing for a period of time in spring to wait for animals to regain their strength and for newborn calves to become stronger, the nomads of Dora Karmo begin to move pastures with their herds. In total, they move seven times in a year, from lower to higher elevation and then back again. The first move of the year from the winter house, a single-storey stone-and-mud structure, to the black nomad tent made of woven yak hair occurred on a grey and snowy day in late May. Rain and snow had fallen incessantly during the previous three days and, except for going out to milk or herd the animals, the five of us remained indoors, in one small room, waiting. Aku Kungo, my adopted father and village schoolteacher, sat on his bed while looking out the window, spinning his large prayer wheel and chanting under his breath. His lips moved continuously and his deep voice hummed a hypnotic monotone that filled the room. Dako, the elder of his two daughters, sat by the stove, about 1½ metres away, in the place that marked her control of the kitchen and of meals. Phalko, the younger daughter, paced back and forth, sometimes going to the next room—where the young animals were tied up at night—to collect more kindling and dried yak dung for the stove.
Both women continued with their routine household chores. Tsering Panjur, Phalko’s young fiancé—the household’s son-in-law, or magpa—did not have a regular routine of chores and, therefore, was the most restless, repeatedly sitting down to converse with us and then suddenly getting up to look out the window or up towards the sky. And, as the foreign student who wanted to learn about how Tibetan nomads live, I was feeling cold, dejected and impatient to move.

Over the course of those three long days, I checked and double-checked with Aku Kungo: ‘When are we going to move?’ He replied, ‘In the fourth month, third day’. I didn’t fully believe him: ‘You said we were going to move eight days ago’. He patiently said, ‘The weather was not good’. I doggedly persisted: ‘Then you said we were supposed to move yesterday’. He replied, ‘Jhon-la Kunchok⁶ (the village leader) said to wait’. I continued: ‘So, now, is that the fourth month, third day?’ ‘Yes, it is’, he said. I did my approximate calculations—the third day of the fourth month of the Tibetan year of the fire-dog was 29 May 2006. Tomorrow.

And so we did. Jhon-la Kunchok had conferred with monks at the local monastery about favourable dates in the Tibetan calendar for moving. Based on a complex calculation of the present year against the sighting of stars (and indications of good weather), he would then decide and tell us when to move. Until that announcement, we had waited.

On the morning of the move, we all woke up early. The wet and cold weather had turned the dry earth of the enclosed area outside the house into a gooey mass of mud. Phalko and Tsering Panjur left to herd the animals out and to prepare nine of the strongest load-bearing yak for the move. In the house, the listless and unfocused energy of the past few days gave way to a burst of activity. Dako was busy organising bowls, pots and cooking ingredients, such as salt, oil, chilli and pickled vegetables. She told me to place them into plastic sacks. We also prepared the old leather sacks of barley flour, wheat flour and butter that had been stacked next to my bed all winter. When Phalko and Tsering Panjur returned with the yak, they tied them in a single line along one straight rope that was fixed to the muddy ground. Dako shot off a list of instructions about sacks that should be taken first. Finally, six yak were loaded up, their burdens
tied to the wooden saddles by strings of strong old leather. The muddy ground was slippery, the drizzle of snow and mist made it difficult to see, and the cold weather numbed my fingers. Moving was tough work.

This pattern of moving-waiting-moving repeated itself for the rest of the year until the nomads moved back to their winter houses. However, variations occurred, as on the third move from the spring to the summer pastures, when Jhon-la Kunchok ordered a small pause in our movements. Because of the large distance, nomads moved to the summer pastures over two days—on the first day, the black tent and the majority of household items; on the second day, the animals. Before the rest of my household could complete the move on the second day, however, Jhon-la Kunchok issued a decree, forbidding animals from Dora Karmo to arrive in the summer pastures that day. If anyone disobeyed this decree, they would be fined five yuan per animal. Dako and Phalko waited on the top of a hill overlooking the summer pastures where I already was. I could see them in the distance on the afternoon of the second day, but they did not arrive until the following morning after the morning milking.

When they did arrive, I asked them in a typical Tibetan nomad greeting, ‘A kad?’ (Are you tired?). ‘Ma kad’ (Not tired), was their—and the standard—reply. I asked them how it had been sleeping in the white canvas tent, which is used in the summer as a kind of satellite tent (I had slept in the black tent). Dako replied, ‘it was comfortable’. I brought up the issue of the decree. Tsering Panjur said that it happened regularly, particularly in the shared summer pastures where we were. The summer pastures were called Ngu-la-tang (the crying grasslands) because Aku Dretung, the uncle of eastern Tibet’s famous warrior-king Ling Gesar, had apparently got lost here amidst the dense mist, thick forests and rocky terrain. In his despair, he had cried out to the gods for help. His tears moved them to pity and they showed him the way on to the road to Lhasa. Ngu-la-tang was the summer pastures of four nomadic communities, collectively called Nalungma, of which Dora Karmo was part. Hence, the purpose of the decree was to curb disagreements and feuds among households of the various communities because male yak tend to fight with those of another herd if they get too close to each other. If yaks were to fight, male nomads would demand recompense and this would potentially
spark off disagreements that could lead to death and revenge feuds. Hence, decrees were planned among the village elders of Nalungma and waiting, then, became a way to maintain order and coordinate moves in the shared summer pastures of Ngu-la-tang.

Yet this kind of coordination differed from the kind imposed by the queue. In the very notion of a ‘queue’, the procession of order in turn was a linear and uni-dimensional progression. One waited in a line. Among Tibetan nomads, coordination did not occur in one dimension and order was not necessarily provided in turn. In the three-dimensional grasslands, groups of households—organised as encampments, or tshowa—moved together. Moving entailed an awareness of what another household was doing: if a nomad saw that a neighbour was already moving towards one place or grazing his animals on one area of pasture, then he would move in another direction. And waiting, then, complemented moving: one was always attentive to the movements of the other, and waited, or not, based on the flow of movement at that time and place.

**Waiting for Death and Rebirth**

The complementarity of moving and waiting occurs not only in a physical sense but also metaphysically, in the progression through the life cycle and movements from death to rebirth. Tibetan Buddhists believe in the continuity of consciousness after death into future existences. Everyone is subject to this cycle of life, death and rebirth. Without enlightenment, it is impossible for the consciousness to escape from cyclic suffering; however, there are opportunities to prepare for a favourable rebirth, even to achieve liberation, and one of these opportunities is afforded at the moment of death, in the transference of consciousness from this life to the next. Hence, it is possible to wait for a new beginning by actively preparing for death.

The physical rigour of work epitomises nomadic life on the Tibetan plateau. The routine chores of both female and male nomads, according to the rhythms of the seasons and the subsequent influences of these on the environment, regulate the patterns and pauses of movement and waiting. As with other cultures, when old age beckons, Tibetan nomads begin to retreat from the busy activities of the household. Older nomads leave off herding, milking, and collecting yak dung and kindling to perform sedentary tasks—work that
requires minimal movement. Sorting through yak hair and spinning the hair into yarn for black tents and ropes are examples of such tasks. Often, older nomads do not move to the summer pastures with the rest of the family, opting to remain in the relative quiet of the winter house. They begin to stop moving.

Increasingly, older nomads turn their attentions and senses to religious practices: chanting, prostrating, circumambulating around prayer wheels, spinning smaller prayer wheels, and meditating. They will congregate in monasteries, if there is one in close proximity, or other sites of religious significance, silently chanting under their breath, their lips moving to a constant rhythm as they spin their prayer wheels in a clockwise direction. They will also attend more and more teachings at their monastery in order to hear the voice of their lama, to grow more accustomed to his sound. These practices are all part of their preparations for the next life, and waiting for death and rebirth becomes a set of activities geared towards this simultaneous end and new beginning.

In Dora Karmo, when a family believes that a person is about to die, they send for a highly-regarded lama to meditate and chant. Preferably, this lama will be one that the dying person has heard frequently in his/her life because it is important that the familiar sound of the lama’s voice functions as a beacon and guide to the dying person in his/her journey to rebirth. Depending on the individual person, the waiting period before death will vary significantly. This again requires the lama to be attentive to the particular condition and needs of the dying person. The attending lama chants passages, giving instruction to the dying on how to understand death-to-rebirth experiences, and tells the dying how to navigate through the journey of death.

At the moment of death, it is important for the chants to be clear and loud because the consciousness is described as confused or bewildered. Yet the dying person will recognise the voice of his lama and follow the sound that guides him/her through death and finally to rebirth. Significantly, the chants are also directed towards the listeners, as a way for them to resolve their grief and to reinforce their own preparations for death. Waiting for death occurs throughout one’s life.
For Tibetan nomads of Dora Karmo, death is viewed not as the end but as an opportunity for liberation; preparing to die, then, entails physical activities that lay the foundation for a favourable rebirth, and waiting for rebirth becomes an attentive act of listening, comprehending and following instructions, in order to proceed back to a beginning. The linearity of time is transformed into cyclical time that has no end. Nomads wait, then, just as they move—continuously through life, and back again.

**Conclusion**

My brief ethnography of Tibetan nomads has presented a way of understanding how to live with/in multiple temporalities. As people who are constantly in movement, either through place, activity or the life cycle, nomads are able to modulate their lived time with the natural rhythms of the earth and with the cycles of life. In the cycle of life, moreover, time becomes circular and waiting has no final end. Perhaps because of this, nomads readily abide by the structures of religious authority, thus managing contingency. Furthermore, in their interdependent and attentive interactions with their environment, structures and each other, they have achieved an attitude that does not attempt to grasp or fix. Subsequently, a phenomenon, like waiting, flows with time (or times), rather than being blocked out in time.

This has been placed in comparison to the contexts of waiting in other modalities. For the person waiting in those other ways, the concepts of space and time—the latter, in particular—take on certain characteristics for the waiting person. When we wait in the doctor's clinic, for example, we surrender our time to another. This is willingly done, except when it takes too long, when we start to feel out of synchronicity with the time that we think it should take. Waiting, then, becomes a waste of time; we begin to juxtapose our inaction with the constant motion of the world we can see through the clinic window and we feel impatient with waiting because we believe we have been placed out of sync with the time of others.

This brings us to the point that Bergson proposes, that within us all, there is an inner durée, or duration, of which there are two components: ‘thought’ or mathematical time and ‘lived’ or fluid time.
Thus, waiting is always placed within the context of time calculated against either a ticking clock or other people, and within the context of actual lived time. How these different temporalities coexist within us bears on our attitudes in waiting. As an example of the tensions that may arise as a result of the coexistence of these different temporalities, Schweizer looks to the example provided by James in *The Wings of the Dove* of Kate Croy’s impatience during her wait for her father: ‘Kate’s pacing, we might say, enacts the waiter’s attempt to harmonise Bergson’s two temporalities: to adjust her inner rhythms to the rhythms of the clock … She can no more increase the movements of the clock than she can escape her own body. She endures both.’11. When the temporalities are discordant, waiting becomes impatient, frustrated and angry. If this dissonance continues for too long, we lose our position in time, just like Didi and Gogo, and come to an existential crisis.

This leads me to a further note on the context of waiting among the nomads of Dora Karmo. Without overplaying the suggestiveness of etymology, the interplay between the enchantment mentioned in the quote by Barthes at the start of this essay and the chanting of prayers that Tibetans nomads enact warrants comment. ‘chant’ is derived from the French *chanter* and the Latin *cantare*, meaning ‘to sing’.12 The related word ‘enchantment’ means to encircle with singing, or to bewitch/charm. Thus, when they live the fullness of movement and waiting as a whole, nomads of Dora Karmo experience ‘waiting as an enchantment’, the source of which refers to the authority that frames their chanting of prayers and meditations. Enchantment allows the moving-waiting-moving refrain of nomadic life to be experienced as a musical phrase, where waiting is the syncopation to the musical passage in movement. Chanting Buddhist prayers and meditations creates, to a significant extent, the experience of enchantment for Tibetan nomads, thus enabling them to embrace waiting as the necessary complement to moving. Moreover, enchantment does not disavow the awareness of what occurs but rather heightens the physical senses to a greater awareness of time and place.

Waiting is an inescapable symptom of living in a world with others. *Waiting for Godot* provides us with a glimpse of the parody that occurs when enchantment disappears, when the bareness of
existence unfolds amidst confused and discordant temporalities. On this stage, waiting takes on the form that many of us recognise: an absence of a way to fill up ‘empty’ space and time. And perhaps this emerges only in the modern condition, which may be nothing more than our inner struggle to reconcile the mental constructs we ourselves have created and hold on to.

Notes
1 I refer to this in its theatrical context.
2 Mann.
3 The symbolism of the name in Tibetan and from the local point of view suggests that the circle is pure (from the colour, white) and nurturing (from the feminine gender of the rocks, indicated by the suffix ‘-mo’).
5 This is a Tibetan word that is sometimes used to refer to monks. It also means ‘uncle’, which is how I use it in this essay.
6 Jhon-la is the household name. Kunchok is the village leader’s name.
7 In Tibetan, *khrims*.
8 At the exchange rate in 2006, where US$1 = RMB 8, this was approximately US$0.70.
9 These meditations and chants are taken from an important text known as the *bardo-thodol chen mo* (literally, The Great Liberation by Hearing), more commonly known in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Sections of the *bardo-thodol chen mo* will already be known to the dying person; in fact, part of the preparations for death throughout a nomad’s life, not only in old age, will be the constant chanting of memorised portions of the *bardo-thodol chen mo*.
10 Goss and Klass.
11 Schweizer, pp. 782–3.